

Photospot: Star-spotted Nightjar

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Star-spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus stellatus* has been known to science for little over a century, since being discovered at the Kassim River, eastern Ethiopia, in January 1899¹. It has subsequently remained a relatively obscure species, observed only occasionally and photographed more rarely still. Consequently, its breeding biology is unknown² and status within its localised range poorly known. Zimmerman *et al*³ describe it as 'locally common in n. Kenya on lava rock-strewn deserts with scattered areas of bare sandy soil', while Safford *et al*⁴ report that '... *Caprimulgus stellatus* was probably also common' on the Nechisar plains, where its presence was confirmed by two road kills (R Safford pers comm).

The species owes much of its enigmatic reputation to its localised distribution, which is largely restricted to relatively remote areas of northern East Africa. Its strongholds lie in north and north-west Kenya (north of 01°15' N and between 34°55' E and 38°00' E)^{1,2} and central Ethiopia (in the Awash valley⁶). It is recorded more sporadically in Djibouti, north-west Somalia, south-east Sudan, and at Artu and Nechisar National Park in Ethiopia^{2,4,5}. Star-spotted Nightjar favours dry habitats at low altitudes (possibly up to 1,980m) including stony semi-desert, black lava fields, dwarf bush grassland and dry, open bushland².

Identification is made especially difficult by an overlap in distribution with the almost indistinguishable, and possibly more variable, Plain Nightjar *Caprimulgus inornatus*. Both these plainly marked species are small- to medium-sized, and have proportionately large heads. Zimmerman *et al*³, the only field guide to illustrate and comprehensively describe the two, states that Star-spotted Nightjar is 'Similar to Plain Nightjar but still plainer, and readily distinguished from it by prominent white throat patch (usually divided by a dark midline) and smaller white tail corners'. In the case of the individual photographed, the white throat markings were almost unnoticeable even in the hand, and only became apparent by closely examining the parted throat feathers.

Importantly, female Plain Nightjar lacks white in the tail and wings, while the male has broader white tips to the two outermost tail feathers. Only in the hand, when wing and tail patterns can be examined, can these species be separated with certainty.

This individual, believed to be an adult female, was caught on 28 November 1999 in Nechisar National Park, Ethiopia. It was located shortly after sunset in marginal habitat on the western border of the Nechisar plains, between grassland and dry open bush.

Acknowledgements

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References

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Figure 1. Star-spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus stellatus*, a little-known inhabitant of low-altitude deserts and arid bush of northern Kenya and central Ethiopia. This female was photographed adjacent to the Nechisar plains, southern Ethiopia, in November 1999 (Claire Spottiswoode & Michael Mills)



Figure 2. Diagnostic flight-feather pattern of female Star-spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus stellatus*. Note the smudge of white covering just the tip of the outermost tail feathers and the narrow white blotches to the four outermost primaries (Claire Spottiswoode & Michael Mills)



Figure 3. Star-spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus stellatus* is similar to the partially sympatric and almost indistinguishable Plain Nightjar *C. inornatus*. Both are small, to medium-sized species, plainly marked and have proportionately large heads. Interestingly, this individual had almost no white on the throat, despite this being widely cited as a useful field character (Claire Spottiswoode & Michael Mills)



Figure 4. Star-spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus stellatus* is generally plainer than Plain Nightjar *Caprimulgus inornatus*, and has tiny black star-like spots on the crown and scapulars (Claire Spottiswoode & Michael Mills)



Figure 5. Nechisar plains, southern Ethiopian Rift Valley; habitat of four nightjar species including the little-known Nechisar *Caprimulgus solala* (described on the basis of a single wing from a road-kill) and Star-spotted *C. stellatus* (Claire Spottiswoode)